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Theology as a Science: An Historical and Linguistic Approach

A Position Paper By

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Editor's Note: The "Invited Position Paper" segment is a unique feature to SHERM journal where hand-selected scholars are invited to write their particular standpoint or attitude on a specific issue. While the position paper is intended to engender support for the paper's line of reasoning and overall conclusion, the paper is not intended to be a simple op-ed piece. Rather, each essay must be academic in nature by deriving its position from verifiable data and/or the author's training and experience as a scholar in a particular field of study.

In this particular case, the author was asked to answer the following question:
"Can the study of theology and/or metaphysics be classified currently or ever qualify in the future as a scientific endeavor? Why or why not? If yes, what criteria or methods would need to be in place and practiced to make them scientific? If no, what is it about 'science' that prevents theology and/or metaphysics from qualifying?"

Abstract: This article argues that, given the historical and linguistic background of the terms involved, the study of theology can, in fact, be considered a scientific endeavor, but one must clearly note what is inferred by the term "scientific." Historically, the term "science" or "scientific" has dealt with the realm of knowledge of both the natural and supranatural world. The question of whether theology should be classified as a science arose during the formation of the medieval universities in the thirteenth century, as well as the formation of modern German universities in the nineteenth century. Theologians from Aquinas to Schleiermacher argued that theology should be considered a science and, therefore, a proper subject of study in the university. The affirmation of theology as a science in this article is based on this historical survey, as well as the broader linguistic understanding of the term "science."

Keywords: Theology, Metaphysics, Science, Wissenschaft, Knowledge, Wisdom

Introduction

THE CURRENT DIVIDE BETWEEN science and faith appears ever-widening. Clear battle lines have been drawn and the two camps seem happily separated. As long as each respective discipline stays on their own side, nobody

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gets hurt. For some, in both the scientific and theological communities, the question of whether the study of theology could be considered a scientific endeavor deserves an emphatic 'no.' For those seeking unity, or with a desire to elevate theology back to a place of prominence in the marketplace of ideas, a quick 'yes' is uttered. However, this question has no simple answer. Our initial reactions simply expose our prejudices, even the good ones.

In order to properly answer this question, we need to slow down these prejudgments and recognize the presuppositions we each bring to the discussion. I write this position article as a theologian, not as a scientist, therefore I will examine this question through the lens of theology. It is important to note that this is not the first time this particular question has been raised. The current tension between science and faith makes the issue appear novel, but it has, in fact, been debated for at least eight hundred years. In order to answer this question, we will survey the historical development of the problem in church history, beginning first in the thirteenth century all the way through the formation of nineteenth-century German universities. We will also examine the linguistic issues surrounding the term "science," particularly how it was used historically in these earlier discussions and the shift of meaning which occurred in the English-speaking West. For me, the question is not whether theology should be considered one of the positive sciences but, rather, how the shift of meaning regarding the term science has affected the way people perceive theology (and the rest of the humanistic sciences, for that matter) as a source of knowledge and truth.

Historical and Linguistic Development

The question of theology's consideration as a science enjoys a rich history, particularly in the thirteenth century scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas and later in nineteenth-century Germany where the discussion centered on whether theology should be included in university curriculums, the *universitas litterarum*.[1] Before the medieval conception of the university, early Christian

[1] Johannes Zachhuber, *Theology as Science in Nineteenth-Century Germany: From F.C. Baur to Ernst Troeltsch* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199641918.001.0001. See also Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, trans. Francis McDonagh (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976), 15−17 and Matthew J. Aragon Bruce, "Schleiermacher and Barth: On Theology as the Science of the Divine Word," in *Karl Barth in Conversation*, ed. W. Travis McMaken and David Congdon (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 27.

teachings separated itself from science (*scientia*), identifying more with wisdom (*sapientia*).[2] In fact, Augustine elevated wisdom above the sciences, noting that wisdom dealt with the eternal God, the highest of all goods, while the sciences were concerned with temporal knowledge.[3] For Augustine, philosophy was the pursuit of wisdom and Christianity represented the highest form of philosophy. Indeed, the conception of Christian teaching as *sapientia* over *scientia* appears in even earlier church fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria.

Wolfhart Pannenberg further notes that this view dramatically shifted in the thirteenth century; and from that point forward, theology was regarded as both *sapientia* and *scientia*.[4] In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas clearly displayed this shift in his great work, *Summa Theologica*. In Article Two of Question One, Aquinas affirms that theology is a science, appealing to Augustine (oddly enough) for support (*STh.* I q.1 a.2). Aquinas based his assessment of theology on the Aristotelian conception of science as laid out in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Posterior Analytics*. For Aristotle, there existed five ways in which humans could attain truth: *intellectus* (reason)*, scientia* (science)*, sapientia* (wisdom)*, prudentia* (prudence)*,* and *ars* (art)*.* At the time of Aquinas, most were comfortable considering theology as *intellectus*, *sapientia*, *prudentia*, and even *ars*, but it was debatable whether it could be considered true *scientia*.

For Aristotle, *scientia* was a system of logical deductions from self-evident first principles leading to what could be called scientific knowledge. For Aquinas, these first principles are comprised of articles of faith revealed by God himself. As a result of theology's mixture of both God's wisdom and human knowledge, Aquinas stressed that theology should be considered both a speculative and practical science (*STh.* I q.1 a.5). By virtue of this unique mixture, and due to his belief that the real subject matter of science was God himself, Aquinas ended up regarding theology as the highest form of science. The higher science Aquinas referred to is what he called the science of God, or God's knowledge of himself. Geoffrey Turner notes that Aquinas also

[2] Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, 8.

[3] Augustine, *The Trinity*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), 340.

[4] Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, 14. Geoffrey Turner notes that the question of theology's status as a science emerges in the twelfth century and is mostly dismissed as a dangerous idea (Geoffrey Turner, "St. Thomas Aquinas on the 'Scientific' Nature of Theology," *New Blackfriars* 78, no. 921 [1997]: 467, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1997.tb02790.x).

considered theology to be a "subalternated or derived science."[5] Aquinas asserted that for theology to be considered a science, it did not need to demonstrate the truth of its own first principles but could derive some of its principles from other established sciences. For support, Aquinas offered the example of mathematics as the basis for several sciences such as physics, architecture, and music (q.1 a.2). In short, Aquinas considered theology as a science (*scientia*) because it was a discipline leading to knowledge that was deduced or derived from those so-called first principles directly revealed by God and corroborated by the other sciences.

The debate as to whether theology should be considered *scientia* continued after Aquinas and reached a particular climax in nineteenth-century Germany.[6] Once the University of Berlin was established in 1812, the question was raised again as to whether theology should be considered a science, or *Wissenschaft*, and therefore given a prominent place in the University's curriculum. Friedrich Schleiermacher voiced support for theology being considered *Wissenschaft* in his treatise, *Gelgentilich Gedanken über Universitäten im deutschen Sinn* (Occasional Thoughts on Universities in the German Sense). For Schleiermacher, theology was not a derived science like Aquinas but rather a positive or practical science. Matthew Bruce stresses that Schleiermacher envisioned theology as an applied science because it was "a critical inquiry that cultivates human knowledge for the purpose of addressing practical individual and social needs."[7] In this way, Schleiermacher's understanding of theology was ecclesial in nature. Theology existed in order to provide clarity for the church in regards to its beliefs and practices. In this practical function, theology finds its importance and coherence, as well.

The context of the formation of universities in Germany is an extremely important aspect for understanding Schleiermacher's view of theology as *Wissenschaft*. Schleiermacher supported theology being taught at the university level because it was in the public's best interest, just as it was for medicine or law. Schleiermacher stressed that theology, as a science, needed to be in an open dialogue with all other areas of human knowledge. Johannes Zachhuber notes that Schleiermacher accepted, in agreement with Aquinas, that theology was based on first principles, which are outside the purview of the positive sciences,

[5] Turner, "St. Thomas Aquinas on the 'Scientific' Nature of Theology," 468.

[6] Turner notes that Aquinas' belief about theology being *scientia* was immediately debated after his *Summa* was circulated (Turner, "St. Thomas Aquinas on the 'Scientific' Nature of Theology," 466).

[7] Bruce, "Schleiermacher and Barth," 26.

but still argued that theology deserved to be included in the conversation because of the central role of the church in social and cultural life.[8] While the status of theology as a credible subject of study in the university was widely debated after Schleiermacher, it soon became evident that in order for theology to be considered *Wissenschaft*, it needed to play by the rules of modernity. Schleiermacher agreed, and theologians following him turned to historical criticism as the proper method for a scientific theology.

Nearly a century after Schleiermacher, Karl Barth continued to affirm the status of theology as a science, but he called into question the historical approach many theologians after Schleiermacher had taken. Barth held nothing against historical or biblical criticism. In fact, he used it himself. He distinguished, though, the nature of theology as science apart from the historical method. Barth considered theology to be a "free science."[9] Theology is free because it "is a science which joyfully respects the mystery of the freedom of its object and which, in turn is again and again freed by its object from any dependence on subordinate presuppositions."[10] Barth was concerned that the modern scientific approach to theology had caused theologians to lose sight of the true object of theology, the ineffable God. He feared that theologians had taken a position above God, much like the scientist sits above the dissected animal or plant. Thus, he stressed the freedom of God as the object of theology. The theologian does not have control over this particular object of study but, rather, is freed by it. In this way, Barth distinguishes theology from other sciences while still affirming its status as *Wissenschaft*.

Barth makes another critical distinction that will be helpful in our current discussion of the question. He notes that that while theology has been traditionally regarded as a science, it is distinguished from what can be termed the natural sciences.[11] Barth reminds his reader that natural sciences are not the only sciences and theology, as a humanistic science, should be considered a science because it shares the qualities of the general sciences. Theology sets out to understand a specific object and its own context in connection with the object.

[8] Zachhuber, *Theology as Science*, 15–16.

[9] Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963), 9.

[10] Ibid. Barth further identifies three subordinate presuppositions: human existence, faith, and reason.

[11] Ibid., 3. Cf. Thomas J. Burke, "Is Metaphysics a Science?," *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 253–57, https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2019.vol1.no2.08.

Barth does note, nonetheless, that theology represents a "special" science due to the nature of the object of study.[12]

Others after Barth have carried on the mantle of theology as a science, most notably T. F. Torrance and Alister McGrath.[13] In the West, however, the understanding of theology as a science has been all but lost. One of the reasons for this is linguistic in nature. For Aquinas, Schleiermacher, and Barth, the terms *scientia* or *Wissenshcaft* more broadly referred to any discipline leading to knowledge. In German, both *Geisteswissenschaftan* (humanistic sciences) and *Naturwissenschaftan* (natural sciences) are considered *Wissenschaften* (sciences) or *wissenschaftlich* (scientific). McGrath rightly notes that the English word "science" has become synonymous with the natural sciences and, therefore, is often separated from the humanities.[14] McGrath even notes that this distinction can be seen in the decades before 1867.[15]

This linguistic transition in English highlights the current distinction held by the general public concerning theology and the natural sciences. Currently in the West, one feels that the natural sciences and the term *science* carry more authority and are perceived as indisputable sources of knowledge and truth, in contrast to more speculative and subjective matters of faith. We have seen this before, though. For Aquinas, Schleiermacher, and Barth, the underlying issue of theology as a science was epistemology. They were not asking the question of whether or not theology should be considered a natural science but whether theology should be considered a discipline that leads to knowledge and truth, not simply faith or belief.

A Way Forward

While the original context of the status of theology as a science pertained to the formation of the university, both in France and Germany, our current discussion is framed differently. Instead of vying for a place of prominence in the academy (that battle has been all but lost for the theologian), the context for the discussion now is theology's inclusion in the marketplace of ideas. The natural sciences have been separated from the humanities and given

[12] Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 3.

[13] See Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1996) and Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology*, vol. 1, *Nature* (New York: T&T Clark, 2002).

[14] McGrath, *A Scientific Theology*, 25.

[15] Ibid.

a place of prominence in society. While the context is different, the deeper layer of the discussion remains the same: do the humanistic sciences, and theology in particular, seek to provide knowledge in a way that puts them on a level playing ground with the natural sciences? Should we consider the knowledge they provide in the same way that we do with the natural sciences? A better understanding of the nature and function of theology will further the discussion.

Definitions of *theology* are numerous. Etymologically, the term refers to the study of God, but the discipline of theology is much more complex than this simple definition, particularly since even this simple definition is more complex than it first appears. Millard Erickson defines theology as a "discipline that strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily on the Scriptures, placed in the context of culture in general, worded in a contemporary idiom, and related to issues of life."[16] With this definition, Erickson highlights the doctrinal nature of theology while also noting the importance of cultural context. Similarly, David Clark notes, "Theology seeks to articulate the content of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the context of a particular culture."[17] Stanley Grenz defines theology as the "systematic reflection on, and articulation of, the fundamental beliefs we share as followers of Jesus Christ."[18] From these definitions, one notes that theology is the articulation of fundamental affirmations of the Christian faith.

Another core function of theology drawn out in other definitions is the function of reflection and observation. Daniel Migliore stresses, "Theology must be a *critical reflection* on the beliefs and practices of the faith community out of which it arises. Theology is not simply a reiteration of what has been or is currently believed and practiced by a community of faith."[19] McGrath notes that theology is "both the process of reflecting on the Bible and weaving together its ideas and themes."[20] Grenz and Franke define theology as:

[16] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), 28.

[17] David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (2003; repr., Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 1.

[18] Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 15.

[19] Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 9; italics in original.

[20] Alister E. McGrath, *Theology: The Basics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 1.

> An ongoing, second-order, contextual discipline that engages in critical and constructive reflection on the faith, life, and practices of the Christian community. Its task is the articulation of biblically normed, historically informed, and culturally relevant models of the Christian belief-mosaic for the purpose of assisting the community of Christ's followers in their vocation to live as the people of God in the particular social-historical context in which they are situated.[21]

Theology is not simply the articulation of Christianity's fundamental beliefs since, after they were articulated, there would be no further need to practice theology. Neither is theology merely the blind acceptance of prior affirmations. Although, like the natural sciences, many prior affirmations stand up to the stress of scrutiny. But, as Migliore stressed, theology is much more than just repeating the beliefs of past generations or, one could add, creedal formulations. Theology must include reflection and investigation. Along with articulation, theology is also a discipline of continuous inquiry and progression.

For theology to be considered a science, it must balance both articulation and inquiry. It must also be open progress. Progress does not infer the undoing of essential affirmations of the faith, but progress may help us understand those essential affirmations in a new light. In essence, theology as a science should exemplify the great Anselmian refrain *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding.

Conclusion

Considering the nature and functions of theology, as well as a broader understanding of the term "science," I affirm theology's status as a science and consider it a scientific endeavor. Theology is not a natural science, and I would caution against trying to make it act like one. I do feel it is important for us to develop a broader understanding of the use of the term science for theology and for the rest of the humanities. The natural sciences are extremely important and the advancements in those fields should not be underemphasized. But sciences of the human spirit, *Geisteswissenschaften*, are equally important sources of knowledge and truth, and their voices deserve to be heard.

[21] Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 16.

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